

“Out of the silence”

Sermon on Remembrance Sunday 2018 – by Revd Canon David Hodgson

All Saints Church Wokingham – Parish Communion Service 9.30am

Gospel: Mark 1: 14- 20

On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month one hundred years ago today the guns of Europe fell silent. There’s a remarkable sound recording of the moment the guns stopped. It was played in TV news programmes last week and you can listen online. Suddenly the reverberating background rumble stops, the last of the nearby booms echoes and then silence; and in the silence the sound of birdsong is clearly heard, like a signal from the earth, or from God, that there is life again after so much death.

In a remarkable personal reflection on the First World War drawing on the experience of her grandfathers Canon Rachel Mann, poet and Anglican priest, makes a helpful link I think between different silences associated with the war. There is the awful silence of the dead – they are no longer able to speak again. There is the silence of that recording - the end of the noise of violence. There is the silence she observed in her grandfathers who survived the trenches, but who were silent about what they had seen for the rest of their lives; and especially one of the two, who was pretty much silent in general for the rest of his life. And then there is the two minutes silence we observe for Remembrance. Silence is not unequivocally a good thing. There are different meanings and reasons for silence. Rachel Mann observes in her book¹ that the silence we observe for Remembrance, whilst it carries the danger of allowing us to be silent for the rest of the year about how damaging war really is, is also perhaps the only appropriate response, the only way of articulating war because there are no words really which can apprehend the depth of the war’s pain and rupture of the fabric of human life as we live it. This silence points us towards how war cannot be stitched into our speech as if it were simply an acceptable occurrence.

She and others have also made the contrast of these silences after the war with the noises of the politics and the war of words and arguments before the First World War; whether to go to war was hotly debated by different politicians and sections of the Press. And there was the excitement among some of those who responded to the call of Lord Kitchener to join up in August 1914; in the single week after Kitchener’s call out, 175,000 men joined up; eventually two and half million men volunteered to join the British Army, a quarter of all the men eligible. Once war was declared opposition to it generally melted away but it was widely believed that all Germany needed was a short sharp shock and the war would be over by Christmas.

The men who left their families, villages and towns in the First World War were responding to a call, out of a duty to defend their country and put right was going wrong in Europe as they saw it. But of course, they could not foresee how devastating the experience was to be for so many of them, nor what a shattering blow the war would turn out to be for the prospects of the future peace and prosperity of Britain and other the European nations for the next 75 years arguably until the Berlin Wall came down. The First World War stands as an epic and tragic example of how very unexpected and how very different the experience of the consequences of human action can be, by comparison with what is expected or predicted. We naturally tend to shape our expectations of the future based on past experience – which works for most ordinary things -and yet time and again it proves to be an inaccurate guide to human behaviour. In the face of what happened, at the Somme, at Passchendaele, by the force of the way things are; all those words of expectation, of what was imagined would be the situation, were rendered silent.

The words of the hymn “All my hope on God is founded” express that sense of the impermanence of human efforts and projects :

“Human pride and earthly glory, Sword and crown betray his trust.

¹ Fierce Imaginings: Ritual, memory and God (DLT 2017)

What with care and toil he buildeth, Tow'r and temple fall to dust"

Hundreds of thousands of men left their homes in 1914 in answer to the call of their nation and government – they could not know what awaited them and the full scale of the sacrifice they were called upon to make. Remembering them as we do is one way of redeeming the value of their lives and their contribution to a future they did not share, so that their suffering and death cease to be a futile waste and this war (together with the Second World War which , almost inevitably, followed) standing at the gateway to our modern age becomes more than simply a tragedy, but as the silence does, points us towards something beyond ourselves, causes us to seek a better vision of life together, causes us to vow to seek peace and to heal divisions, to choose love not hate, faith, not fear of the other.

In Christian faith the better vision of human life is captured in the gospel – the good news of the kingdom of God. This is the message of Jesus when he appeared in public. “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’ The kingdom of God is a powerful symbol of humanity redeemed and transformed; a common life characterised by unity and peace. Where the cycle of violence has been stopped, revenge is no more, and there is no more fear of injury by others.

There is a link between our gospel reading for today and the events of the First World War. Jesus called his disciples and they left their homes and their daily work to follow him. Their expectations of the future were also wrong, and so were challenged and ultimately upended completely. It seems they imagined Christ would establish an earthly kingdom of power and control. They refused to hear that his way was going to be different, a way of service and suffering, even when he told them plainly. They were frightened and dismayed when it turned out the giver of life was drained of life by the earthly powers; when his voice of hope and love was silenced on the Cross. Yet it was out of that silence of the tomb of Christ that God’s new life sprang up again in the resurrection. In Jesus crucified we see the depth of a loving God who enters into and suffers with us in the human predicament. Because the faith we have in the risen Christ is not a facile optimism. It is based on believing God’s love is the sacrificing love which goes to the depth and extent of being silenced and crucified. This love came to light in Jesus; who lived fully the way of peaceableness and basic trust in God’s goodness, who was God’s Anointed one – the Christ.

So we make another remembrance today as we do every Sunday. The remembrance of Christ’s life-giving death and resurrection through sharing in this Eucharist. When we gather around this table, here is God’s healing love for a broken world; shared and offered to all – proclaimed in the good news of God’s love for us in Christ, offered in the sacrament of Christ’s own flesh and blood. Here is the community where friends and strangers hear words of acceptance; where forgiveness is offered and received; where we are listened to; where joys, and sorrows are shared. When Jesus granted these gifts to his disciples they were for the whole world – the resurrection gifts of peace and freedom.

Faith in the risen living Christ then becomes a real and visible thing when communities of people live and share their hope in the life which has overcome death and sin and their hold upon us; when communities seek to live the new life through creating peace, offering forgiveness, and engendering freedom. Such communities are not bound together by ties of shared interests like class or culture; we are held together by sharing these resurrection gifts from God not simply with one another but with all people.

As we share in the silence of the remembrance for the fallen of our wars, and bring their lives into a deeper meaningfulness and community with ours, may we be inspired to enter also a silence of wonder and speechlessness in gratitude before God at the risen life of Christ in us and in our communities of faith. In the life of such a people as we are called to be, by the grace of God,

God's glorious future and purpose for human life may come close even in the middle of the ambiguous and confusing realities of the way things are./END